

## ASHLAND DAILY PRESS

### Great 10 years

Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center celebrates 10th anniversary

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August 25, 2008

Well over a decade ago, area people concerned with tourism in the Chequamegon Bay area dreamed of having a visitor's center, something to get people out of their cars long enough to discover the wealth of attractions the region had to offer.

One obvious location for such a center was at the "T" intersection of State Highway 13 and U.S. Highway Two west of Ashland.

"Impossible," said the skeptics. "A waste of money."

Proving the skeptics wrong was a group whose vision and tenacity resulted in the showpiece Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center, which Friday marked its 10th anniversary.

Helping to celebrate the event were representatives of both of Wisconsin's U.S. Senators, state legislators, and the man who most directly helped to obtain federal funding for the center, Seventh District Congressman Dave Obey.

Obey told the group assembled that the agencies that shared the visitor center were a model for how government ought to work.

"This place is really something special," Obey said. "It explains the geological

history of the lake, it explains the environmental impact of the lake, it explains the cultural history of the area and it also serves as a terrific tool for economic prosperity because it attracts so many people."

Obey noted that people from all over the world have visited the center.

"It is amazing the reach this building has had," he said.

Obey said the center was not an easy idea to get off the ground; at the time it was proposed, there was a moratorium on the construction of federal visitor centers. Only through a cost-sharing arrangement with the state of Wisconsin was the construction made possible, Obey said.

Getting state funds for the construction of the center wasn't easy either, Obey said.

"We thought everything was flowing smoothly, there was some local opposition, but we thought that could be handled in time," he said.

"But after the state agreed to put the money in, there were people in the legislature who got angry at (State Senator) Bob (Jauch) and (State Representative) Barb Linton because they had stood up for northern Wisconsin on issues regarding the distribution of state funds between the urban southeast and northern Wisconsin," he said.

Obey said to retaliate against Jauch, the state funds intended for the visitor center were cut from the budget.

Obey said despite some nasty political wrangling, the funds were restored.

"We made it clear, very simply, that if there was no state share, there would be no visitor center, because the feds were not going to pay 100 percent just because political games were being played in Madison," he said. "Finally they were able to break through that. They were able to get the funding, Tommy Thompson helped, and in the end it all ended well."

Despite the controversy at its beginnings, Obey said the center has proven to be successful beyond anyone's hopes.

"I'm glad I could play a role in it. I know each and every person who also did is proud of it. The community has come to recognize this is now an identifiable key part of the community; I think it helps bring everyone in the region together."

That was a sentiment shared by other speakers at the event.

Governor James Doyle's northern representative Bryce Lechterhand said the center provided a vital educational aspect.

“There are people who travel from all over the United States, all over the world to share in the splendor of Lake Superior. It would be so easy for them to spend a day at the beach and drive on. This building allows them a focal point where they can stop and they can gain an understanding of why it is so important that when they leave, they leave the lake in as good a shape as when they got here,” he said.

Karen Graff, U.S. Senator Russ Feingold's regional coordinator, said the center was one of Feingold's favorite spots.

“He takes great joy in bringing people here,” she said.

Graff presented a certificate of recognition from the U.S. Senate to the center, recognizing the anniversary.

Representing U.S. Herb Kohl was Marjorie Bunce, who said Kohl had told her the center “had turned out to be way more successful than even he had hoped.”

State Representative Gary Sherman noted that nothing as large as the center could be accomplished without the collaboration of a lot of different groups.

“More than the partners who operate the building - and who are, of course, crucial - are the number of different groups who participate in the activities and functions of the center over time. It is just amazing to see how many people this place touches. Nobody could have predicted in 1998 when this place was built that it would be such an incredible success,” he said.

State Senator Bob Jauch said visitors to the center were better off when they left than when they came.

“They are much richer in the experience of knowing a lot about the depth of the beauty of the people who have lived here, the sense of purpose they have and the passion they have for keeping it the way it is, and improving it, and maybe applying a little of that as stewards of our natural resources,” he said.

Jauch thanked Obey for his efforts on behalf of the center and he also thanked Mellen area political and environmental activist Martin Hanson for his role in the center's creation and for many other environmental causes.

“I have to thank him for his years of leadership, his friendship and his doggedness in being sure that people not only understand our responsibilities to the environment, but that we follow it through beyond mere rhetoric and get results,” he said.

Jauch said that even the one-time opponents of the center had come around to seeing its value.

“There were cynics who didn't understand its value, and I think they have come to

understand through its success how important it is and the message it provides," he said.